

# Communication disorders in the ancient world

Peter Kruschwitz and Abigail Cousins

The ability to communicate clearly was prized in the ancient world, and was vital to public success. So how did Greeks and Romans treat those with speech disorders? Peter Kruschwitz and Abigail Cousins communicate their findings.

Throughout the ancient world, across times and cultures, in different literary genres and documentary texts, and for different purposes, the ability to communicate clearly was consistently very highly prized. The crucial importance of public speaking, and of speaking in general, to the lives of people in the ancient world, whether part of the elite or not, is hard to overstate. Politicians from the Roman emperor down to local town councillors conducted their jobs and won prestige through speaking; in the theatre, the law court, the agora, and the forum, speech was used to persuade, uplift, compel, and inform. Good communication skills were linked to intellectual prowess and definitely helped with personal advancement and success.

## Mute like a frog without a tongue

One place where we can see this importance clearly is in ancient curse tablets that try to limit a rival's ability to communicate. See Moreed Arbabzadah's article on pages 21–3. As he writes, these tablets often try to restrict or 'bind' an enemy's abilities: the power of speech was definitely a valid target. One example from Cambodunum (Kempten, Germany) requests:

*Mutae tacitae, may Quartus be mute, may he wander in frenzy, like a fleeing mouse, or a bird against a basilisk, may his mouth be mute, mutae, may the mutae be baneful, may the mutae tacitae be mute, may Quartus be delirious, may Quartus be (haunted by? dug up by?) the Erinyes and Orcus, may the mutae tacitae be mute at the golden gates.*

Another example, from Celti (Peñaflor, Spain), begs:

*May Marcellus Valerius be mute and silenced against Gaius Licinius Gallus, just like a frog without a tongue is mute and silenced, thus*

*may Marcellus be mute, silenced, maimed against Licinius Gallus.*

If the power of clear communication was such a vital asset that unnatural forces could be invoked to disrupt it, what happened to people who suffered from some natural form of communication disorder, such as a stammer? Today, possibly the most difficult thing for such people to deal with is the inconvenience. In the ancient world, such impairments could lead to a complete inability to be seen as a valuable and useful member of society – a freak of nature, devoid of reason and unable to participate. In those cases in which intellectual and physical prowess in spite of a communication disorder was impossible to deny – Alcibiades, Demosthenes, and the emperor Claudius are obvious examples – either deep respect or public ridicule (or both) were sure to follow: such people did not fit the expected mould.

Some ancient writers theorized about the origins of speech disorders, and suggested cures; others used cruel, comical descriptions among the rhetorical and literary devices used against enemies. Among the former, the Hippocratic Corpus of medical writing includes many passages related to specific cases of speech defects or complete loss of speech – treatment is crude, and the descriptions are less than helpful to establish a good understanding of the actual diagnosis. A rather fuller treatment of matters affecting human voice and speech is to be found in the eleventh book of Aristotle's *Problems*, where phenomena related to voice and speech impediments are analysed in the context of the ancient theory of heat and coolness regulating bodily functions. Aristotle writes:

*How do stammerers come about? Perhaps they are rather rushed by the heat, so that they hesitate, stumbling, like those who are enraged? For these, too, often hold their breath. Thus a lot of breath comes*

*together. Or do they pant due to the boiling of the heat, for it is a large quantity and cannot escape before the appropriate time for breathing? Or, rather the contrary, is it the cooling rather than the heat of the place that produces the sound, like an apoplexy of that body part? Thus, if they both consume the heat from wine and keep talking continuously, they produce coherent speech more easily.*

Wine and continuous talk may be an exhilarating (if dependency-inducing) cure for the problems described – certainly an unorthodox method by modern standards. Yet, treatment seems desirable, as communication disorders, according to Aristotle, may have obvious psychological side-effects as well:

*How come stammerers are melancholic? Is it due to melancholy's habit to follow imagination quickly on the one hand, and due to stammerers being affected by this particular trait on the other? For in them the urge to say something outperforms the ability to do so, as the mind rapidly follows one's ideas. And it is the same for those who lisp: for in their case, too, the relevant speech organs are too slow. There is a sign for that: for drunk people reach the same state, when they pursue a quick impression rather than to follow their reasoned mind.*

## A useless man, bad at speaking, too

Not all ancient writers shared Aristotle's enquiring, relatively sympathetic approach. Inability to speak properly could be used as a rhetorical trope, a standard means of belittling an enemy. Pliny the Younger, in a letter to Catus Lepidus, reports how Marcus Regulus performed a rather inept reading of a work commemorating his recently deceased son:

*Imbecillum latus, os confusum, haesitans lingua, tardissima inventio, memoria nulla, nihil denique praeter ingenium insanum, et tamen eo impudentia ipsoque illo*

*furore pervenit, ut orator habeatur.*

*Weak lungs, elocution confused, a stammer, exceptionally slow at finding the right words, no memory – nothing at all but an unbalanced temperament, and he still managed, by means of this impudence and this very frenzy, to be regarded an orator.*

Regulus, according to this, clearly would not have been cut out for a life in the public sphere of imperial Rome, an environment that required rhetorical skills from its upper-class members to succeed, if it had not been for his ability to fuse impudence and stamina – and Pliny sees this passion as excessive and disordered, not proper eloquence at all.

The description of Regulus' rhetorical ineptitude is a full, intense barrage: it covers lack of volume, lack of articulation, lack of coherence, lack of imagination, lack of quick wit, and lack of memory. The fact that Regulus' frenzy is spurred by his grief at the death of his son does not win much sympathy from Pliny; in fact the whole tone of the letter criticizes Regulus for unmanly, excessive grief that is reflected in his unmanly, imperfect oratory. But is this a moral failing, or actually a disability of some sort? The first three of these negative qualities – *latus* (lungs), *os* (mouth), *lingua* (tongue) – manage to paint the picture of a person affected by some form of disability, or more precisely: a communication disorder. Lack of physical strength is combined with an inability to produce articulate speech, and even this inarticulate speech comes in an unusual form – a stammer, most likely, as the common interpretation of *lingua haesitans* would suggest.

Insults on this level are not altogether unheard of, as a famous passage from Plautus' play *Mercator* suggests:

*In that matter you are articulate enough to give tit for tat, but when it comes to what you were asked to do, you are lame, blind, mute, weak, and lame.*

Here, too, (absence of) physical strength is closely related to the (in)ability to speak, if in the context of a comedic text that indulges itself with a degrading cascade of abusive adjectives against the interlocutor.

One of the most vivid examples is found in Seneca the Younger's satirical work *Apocolocyntosis* ('Pumpkinification', as opposed to 'deification'), which purports to describe the events when Rome's emperor Claudius (left) died and arrived in heaven:

*Jupiter was notified that someone had come who was of decent stature and grey-haired. This person*

*appeared to be threatening god-knows-what, for he was constantly moving his head and dragging his right foot. He had been asked of what nation he was: he had responded god-knows-what with disturbed sound and confused voice; he [sc. the messenger] hadn't understood his language, but it was neither Greek nor Roman nor that of any other known people. Then Jupiter ordered Hercules, who had explored the entire world and seemed to know all nations, to go and find out which nationality this person belonged to. Hercules was very disturbed when he first encountered him – he thought he'd already faced all the monsters. As he encountered what seemed to be a new species – the uncommon gait, the voice not of a land-animal, but of the kind that sea-animals tend to have, hoarse and unstructured – he thought that a thirteenth labour had just materialized for him. When he looked closer, though, the thing seemed to be a kind of man.*

It is hard to diagnose the precise conditions that affected Claudius, and that Seneca lampoons here. Other ancient sources suggest disabilities that impaired his walking as well as his ability to speak, and it is clear that the imperial family – quite possibly for those very reasons – never saw Claudius as an heir apparent.

Claudius, though, for all his (alleged) faults and in spite of all the potential disadvantages that were brought about by his conditions, was a learned, cultured, and clearly very intelligent man. His inability to produce articulate speech, as exploited by Seneca in the above piece, thus gains its particular comic height from the apparent contrast with the learned content of his inarticulate speech. It also derives its particular dynamic from the fact that, in the intellectual context of the ancient world, perfected, powerful speech was as we have seen an essential part of human civilization.

Is there any truth in this account? As it happens a real speech by Claudius does survive, inscribed on bronze (pictured above) and also recorded by Tacitus. It's a record of a rather lengthy speech of A.D. 48 in which Claudius argued for the rights of rich Gauls to enter the Roman senate. Though Tacitus seems to have edited the speech quite heavily to tidy it up, the inscribed version seems to be a verbatim transcription: it includes lengthy learned digressions on the early history of Rome, and interjections from senators telling the emperor to get on with it. Perhaps this habit of intellectual digression, coupled to the emperor's physical limitations, underlies Seneca's cruel portrayal.

Claudius is just one prominent example

of a public figure more or less consistently reported as affected by some form of communication disorder. Other famous cases reported from the ancient world include Alcibiades (who is the butt of abuse, for this reason among others, in Aristophanes' plays), Plato, Charmides, Fulvius Bambalio ('The Lispings', Mark Antony's father-in-law), the Greek orator Demosthenes, who went to great lengths to correct his speech impediment (his lisp came to be considered a charming part of his speech), and Battus, another ruler whose name is linked to the history of speech impediments in language. A particularly interesting case, however, can be identified in a son of Rome's short-term emperor Vitellius, who held office fleetingly in the chaotic 'year of the four emperors':

*[Vitellius] married Petronia, the daughter of a man of consular rank, and, from her, he had a son, Petronianus, who was one-eyed. As this son was installed as heir ... [sc. Vitellius] shortly thereafter, as is believed, killed him, while the incriminating story was fabricated that he intended parricide and then, driven by his conscience, drank the poison himself that was already prepared for the crime. He [sc. Vitellius] soon married Galeria Fundana from a father of praetorian rank, and he had two children from her, one of each sex: the male one, however, due to a stammer of his mouth, was virtually mute and dumb.*

Whether or not this report can claim any historical credence, what is interesting here is how Suetonius' Vitellius (pictured right, who is presented as a cruel and extravagant degenerate) is obviously unable to sire strong, healthy male offspring who are fully in possession (much less in control) of all their five senses. Unlike Claudius, who was fortunate (?) enough to end up in a position of power, Vitellius' stammering son remains nameless – and it is unclear as to whether he met the same fate as his one-eyed half-brother.

The idea that (in)ability to speak showed something about the innate nature of the speaker or his lineage is also seen in ancient descriptions of whole peoples or nations (recall that the Greek term 'barbarian' refers to someone who can't speak Greek, but can only ba-ba-babble). Following the common ancient logic that the further a country lay from the Mediterranean centre of civilization, the odder its inhabitants must be, 1st-century A.D. Roman geographer Pomponius Mela reports a most remarkable story about the peculiar communication of peoples inhabiting remote parts of the African continent,

presumably Ethiopia:

*There are, too, beyond the deserts that we just mentioned, mute peoples and those who use nods instead of producing speech, some lack the sound of a tongue, some lack tongues altogether, others have their lips grown together, except that under their noses there is a small tube through which they are said to drink, using straws, and through which, when the desire to eat arises, they are said to absorb individual grains of the crops that grow there scattered across.*

Here we see a logical extension of the ancient idea of perfection in speech as a sign of moral and intellectual value. If ability to speak positioned you at the centre of affairs, inability pushed you to the margins; at the margins of the inhabited world, then, it would not be surprising to find creatures whose odd limitations of communication made them, like Claudius or Regulus, less than perfect examples of humanity.

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